49th Parallel, Issue 36 (2015)
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ISSN: 1753-5794

Terence Finnegan, *A Deed so Accursed: Lynching in Mississippi and South Carolina, 1881-1940*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013. 233pp.

GUY LANCASETER – ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ARKANSAS HISTORY & CULTURE*

Lynching has captured the mind of southern historians like nothing else - not a year goes by, it seems, that at least half a dozen books on it are published by scholarly presses. In the popular imagination, too, lynching ranks as the signature crime against African Americans, one that has been the focus of much remembrance in recent years. Moreover, the term lynching is often evoked metaphorically to describe situations far afield from old-fashioned racial violence, as when Clarence Thomas described the controversy surrounding his nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court as 'a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks'.

At present, one might be forgiven for thinking that lynching is a bit over-analyzed and the term rather stripped of meaning, but Terence Finnegan proves this notion wrong in *A Deed So Accursed*. By mirroring the approach of W. Fitzhugh Brundage and comparing how the practice of anti-black vigilantism was perpetrated in two Deep South states, Mississippi and South Carolina, Finnegan manages to expose the role of factors such as demographics, the relative fluidity of social conditions, changes in employment practices, and levels of black political organization and economic dependence in producing regional and temporal variations in racist violence.

Finnegan begins in the Yazoo Delta of Mississippi, a region that promised African Americans genuine economic advancement in the late 1800s, allowing them to take up tenant farming on profitable terms and even acquire their own landholdings. However, early twentieth century fluctuations in cotton prices, together with the boll weevil, forced many into a life of sharecropping. Finnegan compares the motivations of lynch mobs with the change in black economic status, concluding that, when African Americans were at their most independent, they were most commonly lynched for alleged murder of white men, often the result of planter-tenant discord: 'After 1900, however, alleged crimes against women became a more frequent pretext for lynching…. When the economic position of African

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Americans deteriorated, Delta whites lynched African Americans less frequently but for more stereotypical reasons' (21). In some respects, South Carolina constitutes a mirror of Mississippi, with offenses against women ranking first among alleged causes of lynching in the state during the 1880s and the declining significantly as African Americans were deprived of political power. Moreover, white South Carolinians evidenced a greater respect for the judicial system's ability to handle purported black criminals than did the more frontier-like Mississippi.

Lynching was intimately tied to politics in both states, serving as a form of social control: 'Black political power in Mississippi was strongest in the Yazoo Delta, the state's richest agricultural region, which intensified white concerns about the possibility of a resurgence of the Republican Party, while South Carolina experienced comparatively less lynching in black/Republican regions as those were declining in economic significance' (64). In both states, lynching grew following the disfranchisement of African Americans, in part because this decreased black political power and made them less able to fight against vigilantism, and because the same restrictions on voting (literacy tests, poll taxes) affected lower-class whites and thus exacerbated class and racial tensions. Contrary to white-on-white lynching, which regularly targeted outcasts and strangers, white-on-black lynching targeted 'agricultural workers, primarily tenants, who frequently had lived and worked in the same area for years,' highlighting the tensions underlying landlord-tenant relations (110). In fact, lynching tended to decline during those fall months when the harvesting of cotton was paramount, primarily because African Americans might respond by leaving the area, and thus leaving planters in a lurch.

Finnegan even compares the two states' lynching patterns in terms of mob size, finding that, though mobs in Mississippi were generally larger, mobs in areas with class divisions within the white community were usually smaller, such as mobs of whitecappers - usually poor whites who tried to drive off prosperous black families. Likewise were Mississippi mobs more likely to display the corpse of the victim, due to the perceived need to inflict terror upon the black populace, in contrast to the somewhat more settled regime of racial dominance in South Carolina.

Numerous books and articles have rightly presented lynching as an artifact of white supremacy, but few have pushed beyond the monolithic view of white supremacy to reveal its ebbs and flows, its multifaceted nature, how it manifested itself in a variety of ways across time and space, occasionally even at odds with itself. This is the true achievement of *A Deed So Accursed*. Finnegan consummately uncovers the factors that shaped lynching culture in Mississippi and South Carolina, taking seriously the place of both victims and perpetrators in the wider political and economic world. Yes, there are several books published on lynching in any given year, but this one stands out as genuinely revelatory.